

Spinoza on Language

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Abstract

Some scholars have understood that Spinoza's extreme rationalism, nominalism, conventionalism, and rejection of a semantic theory of truth make his philosophy incapable to use language for philosophical and scientific purposes; insofar he considered language a source of inadequate knowledge, falsity, and error. Thus Spinoza finds contradiction in his inevitable use of language to express his philosophy. This paper has four aims: first, propose an explanation on why language is inadequate knowledge for Spinoza; second, present differences between inadequacy, falsity, and error in language; third, argue on the Spinozian use of the geometrical method as a solution for the adequate use of language in philosophical and scientific work; finally, show the problems and limits of this solution for metaphysical discussions.

Keywords: 17th Century Theory of Language, Nominalism, Conventionalism, Memory, Denotation, Connotation.

Introduction

It is common to think that Spinoza's extreme rationalism, conventionalism and nominalism reject language of philosophical knowledge. While contemporary philosophers such as Leibniz consider language as one of the primary philosophical issues to study, for Spinoza it is only part of the first kind of knowledge. According to him words are source of error and falsity, because—among other things—it gives us an inadequate knowledge of things product of contingent associations between bodily motions and images. Spinoza thinks that we only know things truly and adequately through intellectual inferences, i.e., through demonstrations made by reason and intuitive science—, which he considers the second and the third kinds of knowledge, respectively. Some scholars have understood that this rationalist tenet¹ concludes that language is always deceitful, thus Spinoza should have encouraged the idea that adequate knowledge cannot relate with it.

This latter conclusion gives rise to a number of problems for Spinoza's philosophy: mainly, it seems that there is an unbridgeable gap between language and intellect (reason and intuitive science), i.e., between arbitrary associations of images and ideas, on the one part, and eternal, immutable, adequate, true ideas, on the other. If this is the case, then language has no room in Spinoza's philosophy, and his efforts to use it even under a geometrical method are only proofs of his inconsistency of thought.

¹ Other tenets of Spinoza's rationalism are: the identification of logical necessity and causal necessity, thus there is an answer to every "why" question. For Bennet ("Spinoza's Metaphysics," p. 61), this identification is an error that arises from confusion.

This paper has four aims: first, propose an explanation on why language is inadequate knowledge for Spinoza; second, present differences between inadequacy, falsity, and error in language; third, argue on the Spinozian use of the geometrical method as a solution for the adequate use of language in philosophical and scientific work; finally, show the problems and limits of this solution for metaphysical discussions.

1. Denotation in Language

For Spinoza, language is an association of images and ideas. According to him, words are constituted by corporeal motions, and therefore involve the concept of extension. The process of association is described by the following proposition:

“If the human body has once been affected by two or more bodies at the same time, then when the mind subsequently imagines one of them, it will immediately recollect the others also.” [2p18]

And the demonstration reads:

“The mind (by 2p17c) imagines a body because the human body is affected and disposed as it was affected when certain of its parts were struck by the external body itself. But (by hypothesis) the body was then so disposed that the mind imagined two [or more] bodies at once; therefore it will now also imagine two [or more] at once, and when the mind imagines one, it will immediately recollect the other also, q.e.d.” [2p18d]

In order of understanding this, we must summarize certain principles of his metaphysics and physics. Spinoza affirms that God is the unique substance, which expresses its essence in infinite attributes, from which thought and extension are two of them. Because God expresses the same essence in infinite modes through infinite attributes, there is no interaction between attributes and their modifications; each attribute has the same order and connection in their respective modifications (1p28, 2p7). This parallelism of the attributes sustain that God has an idea of any modification through the attribute of thought. The human mind is the idea that God’s Intellect has of a human body actually existing (2p13).²

Thus in order to understand and distinguish external things through language, we should know what happens in the human body.³ It is sufficient to recall Spinoza’s definition of image:

² All ideas are contained by God’s intellect, i.e., by the immediate infinite mode of the attribute of thought (1p21, Ep 64), by which God thinks all the things that he produces (1p16). For the aim of this paper, I make no distinction between the following terms: infinite intellect (*intellectum infinitum*: 1p16, 1p17s, 2p7s, etc.), God’s infinite intellect (*infinitus intellectus Dei*: 2p11c, 2p43s), and God’s eternal and infinite intellect (*Dei aeternum et infinitum intellectum*: 5p40s).

³ For a more profound study of Spinoza’s physics and the process of sensory perception, cf. my “Spinoza on Sensory Perception”.

“[T]o retain the customary words [*verba*], the affections of the human body whose ideas represent⁴ external bodies as present to us, we shall call images of things, even if they do not reproduce the [NS: external] figures of things. And when the mind regards bodies in this way, we shall say that it imagines.” [2p17s]⁵

The human brain retains impressions of the external bodies affections when they are frequent (2post5).⁶ This process begins with an external object affecting frequently an external sense of the human body (e.g. sight, smell, touch, etc.). The resulting brain impression is a mode (affection) of the human body that involves the nature of both bodies (the human body and the external body), but not in the same manner. An image is an idea of an affection of the human body; that is, an idea of certain mode preserved in the human body. When the human mind affirms that image, it also affirms a particular constitution of the human body, i.e. the actual existence of the nature of the human body, as well as the particular existence of the external body (2p16, 2p16c). At the same time, by parallelism, Spinoza relates a constitution of the human body with an idea that the human mind has of it; which means that the human mind has an idea of whatever happens in the human body (2p7, 2p12). Thus an image is also a “vague experience” that the human mind has of external objects (2p40s2); i.e., a particular point of view that a person has of certain object.

Spinoza identifies “image” and “representation” because they both require a medium—in this case, the brain impression that involves a determinate causal affection from an external body—that brings to the mind something that does not have to be present at the moment of the contemplation. Spinoza calls “images of things” (*rerum Imago*) any idea of a brain impression that implies the nature of an external body and represents it as if it were present, even though it is not really present or it no longer exists. For Spinoza’s epistemology, the contemplation of an image and the affirmation of the existence of the object of the image is one and the same thing. This is because he considers that, for one part, an idea is always idea of something; for the other part, there is no distinction between an idea and the affirmation of the content of the idea. Spinoza includes as images “affections that do not reproduce the figures of things” in order to incorporate not only pictures, but any affection that represents an external body, such as sounds (cf. Ep 17, pp. 76-78).

Now, let us go back to the process of association of ideas described in 2p18 & 2p18d. Spinoza calls “memory” (Latin: “*memoria*”) this process (2p18s). Even though the demonstration does not mention it, this process of association of images happens in the

⁴ The Latin word is “repræsentant,” which we need to translate as “represents.” Cf. next note.

⁵ The Latin text states: “Porro, ut verba usitata retineamus, Corporis humani affectiones, quarum ideæ Corpora externa, velut nobis præsentia repræsentant, rerum imagines vocabimus, tametsi rerum figuras non referunt. Et cum Mens hæc ratione contemplatur corpora, eandem imaginari dicemus.”

⁶ This process is expressed by 2post5 in the following terms: “When a fluid part of the human body is determined by an external body so that it frequently thrusts against a soft part [of the body], it changes its surface and, as it were, impresses on [the soft part] certain traces of the external body striking against [the fluid part].” Spinoza’s physics only considers mechanical impacts, and repulsive forces, but not attraction or pulls (Bennet, “Spinoza’s Metaphysics,” p. 62). This general explanation contrasts with the detailed Cartesian explanation of the affection on the pineal gland from external senses. Cf. Descartes: *Treatise on Man*, AT XI 174 ff.; CSM I 105; *Passions of the Soul* (I, 7, AT XI, 332; Descartes, 1985: 330. Cf. *Description of the Human Body*, I, Preface, p. 316; AT XI, 227; Descartes, 1985: 316. Cf. Gueroult, *Spinoza. L’Âme*, p. 202, n. 24; Cf. pp. 171 ff.

attribute of thought meanwhile—by the parallelism of the attributes—occurs an association of brain impressions in the attribute of extension. When the mind affirms one of these impressions, it immediately will affirm the other impression. Thus the human mind will imagine both things at the same time. Spinoza puts an example:

“And from this [process of association of images] we clearly understand why the mind, from the thought of one thing, immediately passes to the thought of another, which has no likeness to the first: as, for example, from the thought of the word *pomum* a Roman will immediately pass to the thought of the fruit [viz. an apple], which has no similarity to that articulate sound and nothing in common with it except that the body of the same man has often been affected by these two [NS: at the same time], that is, that the man often heard the word *pomum* while he saw the fruit.” [2p18s]

This process of association of ideas explains the denotation or signification of nouns. The articulate sound “*pomum*” is an affection of the human body, as well as the sensory perception of an apple. The human body is capable of being affected at the same time by both affections, and when this process happens regularly, it retains both affections as if it were one; thus the human mind will remember both images at the same time when it imagines one of them. This is the origin of denotation, signification, or reference of nouns, in which certain images of sensory perception are joined in a first train of thought. The articulated sounds “*pomum*”, “apple”, “*manzana*” are not part of the nature of the red fruit that they denote, but are related to it through certain natural language education. None of these articulated sounds express the nature of the apple, but only indicate those features by which the human body has been affected by the apple, such as certain colors, shape, smell, taste, etc. Insofar the human mind is accustomed to call different objects by the same word, it will be able to form a general idea of it. For instance, English-speaking people that are accustomed to eat fresh apples, will think that the denotation of the word “apple” is a fresh apple. On the contrary, English-speaking people that are accustomed to eat baked apples, will think that the denotation of the word “apple” is a baked apple.

Spinoza has a conventionalist conception of language: language is grounded in explicit or implicit agreements, such as habit, instead of relation with external reality. Different associations of the certain things with different articulated sounds will be the origin of different natural languages. Furthermore, Spinoza will make no distinction between a natural language and a formal language. Through words we signify things (2p49s: “*verba, quibus res significamus*”).

For Spinoza, a word is a synthesis (or association) between certain sounds and certain images of things. These images are also synthesis of other images. Thus a word is a sign that refers to certain images. Nevertheless scholars have pass out an important implicit supposition in Spinoza’s thoughts on language: that a word and a proposition (or synthesis of words) are synthesis of ideas that only differ in that the former does not make explicit the images that it associates, whilst the latter does. As we will see in the last section this does not mean that any proposition expresses an adequate idea; to do so is needed the participation of reason and intuition.

2. Language Inadequacy 1: Contingent Association

For Spinoza there is no metaphysical contingency (1p29) because everything that exists is a modification of God (1p15), which means that it has been determined by God to exist and act in a certain way (1p24-1p26). The human mind has a true and necessary idea of things insofar it has an adequate idea of them, i.e., an idea that considered without the relation of correspondence with its object, has all the intrinsic properties of a true idea (2a4). A true idea is that which corresponds to its object (1a6: *ideatum*). Because the knowledge of an object implies the knowledge of its causes (1a4), a true idea of an object implies the knowledge of its causes. On the contrary, an idea that a human mind has is inadequate if God's Intellect cannot understand that idea only through the human mind but through the human mind affected by other ideas (2p35); and this is what happens with images of sensory perception.

It is important to note that the *Ethics*' arguments mainly depend on a scheme of completeness or incompleteness, sufficiency or insufficiency, of ideas conceived by a human mind insofar it is considered without the relation of correspondence with its object. This argument is founded both in the parallelism of the attributes, and God's Intellect: an idea that a human mind has is adequate if God's Intellect understands that idea only through that human mind; and that idea will have all the intrinsic properties of its extensional object. Spinoza argues that the human mind is more capable of understanding clearly and distinctly when the actions of its object (i.e., a human body, 2p13) depend more on itself alone, than when they depend on other bodies that concur with it in its acting (2p13s). For Spinoza, an association of images is an effect without causes, and by the only use of its imagination, a human mind cannot know the intrinsic properties of things. It will only know external features of things as it experiences them. For the purposes of this paper, we will only consider three kinds of imaginations: sensory perception, memory, and abstractions. 2p18s says that 2p18 & 2p18d had explained what memory is, because:

“For it is nothing other than a certain connection of ideas involving the nature of things which are outside the human body—a connection which is in the mind according to the order and connection of the affections of the human body.” [2p18s]

Memory is the mental correspondence of a physical association of brain impressions. It is a certain association of images of bodies that affect in a certain order to the human body. This order is a *diachronic* (order in time) or a *synchronic* association of images (order in space). Thus it is an association of images that depends on the order and connection by which bodies have affected the human body; but this order does not express the nature (or essence) of those bodies. Consequently Spinoza explains,

“I say, first, that the connection is only of those ideas which involve the nature of things outside the human body, but not of the ideas which explain the nature of the same things. For they are really (by 2p16) ideas of affections of the human body which involve both its nature and that of external bodies.” [2p18s]

Memory does not express the nature of things (intrinsic features of the bodies represented), but only involves it; i.e., memory expresses only a fragmentary part of the causal process of association of external body affections. Even though there is no metaphysical contingency according to Spinoza (1p29), each person has a different memory (or order of associating images) insofar they are affected by things in different order. For instance, whilst a person includes in its meal a fresh apple, another person eats a baked apple; each one of them will think their meals with different images of apple. Insofar the order of memory does not express the nature of things, and that it is an association realized from the vague experiences of a person, memory could be called contingent.⁷

Memory and images are not adequate ideas of the things they represent. Spinoza continues on 2p18s:

“I say, second, that this connection [i.e., memory] happens according to the order and connection of the affections of the human body in order to distinguish it from the connection of ideas which happens according to the order of the intellect, by which the mind perceives things through their first causes, and which is the same in all men.”
[2p18s]

Memory does not represent the first causes of things, but only the way images are associated through the way they affect at the same time to a person; especially if it is a frequent affection. On the contrary, the order of the intellect (God’s or human’s) is the order and connection of nature (metaphysical order).

An image is not an idea of the essence of an external object. An image is an inadequate idea insofar they do not indicate the nature (or intrinsic properties) of the human body nor of the external body. That is to say that the human mind does not have an adequate knowledge of its body, of itself, and of external bodies that affect it and regenerate it through images (which is the proof aim by 2p19).

For instance, when a person looks an apple for certain amount of time, he will be able to retain the image of that apple, and represent the apple with the features with which he saw it. For example, if he saw a fresh apple, he will recall the apple with the features of certain colors, textures, smell, etc., not those of a baked apple or a painted apple. That image does not involve the essence of the apple, but only the way in which that apple affected the human sight.

3. Language Inadequacy 2: General Terms.

Words cannot be adequate knowledge insofar they represent images, because these do not express adequate knowledge. Words inadequacy is clearer when we consider the process of abstraction, which is known as Spinoza’s nominalism. The process of abstraction has it

⁷ Any contingency, corruption, falsity, and error should be explained by epistemology, not metaphysics. This seems to be the aim of the second book of Ethics as we read in 2p13s, where Spinoza grounds epistemology on physics.

origin in the affections and the human mind capacity to represent distinctly each one of the objects that affect the human body. Spinoza says that,

“[...] the human body, being limited, is capable of forming distinctly only a certain number of images at the same time (I have explained what an image is in 2p17s). If that number is exceeded, the images will begin to be confused, and if the number of images the body is capable of forming distinctly in itself at once is greatly exceeded, they will all be completely confused with one another. Since this is so, it is evident from 2p17c and 2p17s, that the human mind will be able to imagine distinctly, at the same time, as many bodies as there can be images formed at the same time in its body.” [2p40s1]

Abstraction is a mental process that corresponds to a physical process where the human body is overwhelmed by affections produced by external bodies, in a certain time.

Spinoza continues,

“Those notions they call *Universal*, like Man, Horse, Dog, and the like, have arisen from similar causes, namely, because so many images (e.g., of men) are formed at one time in the human body that they surpass the power of imagining—not entirely, of course, but still to the point where the mind can imagine neither slight differences of the singular [men] (such as the color and size of each one, etc.) nor their determinate number, and imagines distinctly only what they all agree in, insofar as they affect the body. For the body has been affected most [NS: forcefully] by [what is common], since each singular has affected it [by this property]. And [NS: the mind] expresses this by the word man, and predicates it of infinitely many singulars. For as we have said, it cannot imagine a determinate number of singulars.” [2p40s1]

Spinoza considers that certain kind of universal terms are formed by the imagination according to the order in which they affected the human body. When the human mind represents the bodies that affected its body, it will lose a lot of the features that differentiate those bodies and will consider them under universal terms. These terms do not represent properties of those bodies, but certain features that the human mind retained of them as long as they affected more constantly its body. He continues:

“But it should be noted that these notions are not formed by all [NS: men] in the same way, but vary from one to another, in accordance with what the body has more often been affected by, and what the mind imagines or recollects more easily. For example, those who have more often regarded men’s stature with wonder will understand by the word man an animal of erect stature. But those who have been accustomed to consider something else, will form another common image of men—for example, that man is an animal capable of laughter, or a featherless biped, or a rational animal.” [2p40s1]

Universal terms formed by the imagination receive different connotations according to the particular experiences of each person. Meanwhile some people consider the erect stature for defining “man”, others consider laughter or reason.

4. Language Inadequacy 3: Universal Terms.

Spinoza says:

“But when the images in the body are completely confused, the mind also will imagine all the bodies confusedly, without any distinction, and comprehend them as if under one attribute, namely, under the attribute of Being, Thing, and so forth. This can also be deduced from the fact that images are not always equally vigorous and from other causes like these, which it is not necessary to explain here. For our purpose it is sufficient to consider only one. For they all reduce to this: these terms signify ideas that are confused in the highest degree.” [2p40s1]

Insofar men use universal terms constructed by their imagination to try explaining philosophical truths, they are having innumerable controversies. This will continue if we use transcendental terms such as “being”, “thing”, and “something” (2p40s1), because they are the total abstraction of any difference between things, apply to any of them, and will not let us conceive anything clearly and distinctly.

“And similarly concerning the others—each will form universal images of things according to the disposition of his body.” [2p40s1]

The particular experience of each person guides the way they make abstractions and bring up general and universal terms.

For Spinoza, language falsity consists in the absence of correspondence between the word and the body that it represents; i.e., it is a mental contemplation of an external object through the idea of a brain impression without awareness of its lack of correspondence to an inexistent body.

The human intellect is part of God’s Intellect, thus the former has the right to know in the same way in which knows the latter. Human intellect comprehends reason and intuition (these are second and third kinds of knowledge, respectively). Meanwhile the intellect (human or divine) have an adequate idea of something, the human imagination has only an inadequate (i.e., incomplete, mutilated, and confused) idea of that thing. Spinoza calls this kind of knowledge “opinion” or “imagination” (2p40s2).⁸ 2p35 says:

⁸ It is important to note that Spinoza introduces this text to state that this is the first way in which the mind perceives things and forms universal notions. The second way is knowledge by signs. Although this paper does not consider the formation of universal notions, these notions work with the information provided by

“Falsity consists in the privation of knowledge which inadequate, or mutilated and confused, ideas involve.”

But this privation is not absolute, because there is no absolute ignorance according to Spinoza (2p35d). This privation is relative

Thus, imagination or:

“[...] knowledge of the first kind is the only cause of falsity, whereas knowledge of the second [i.e., reason] and of the third kind [i.e., intuition] is necessarily true” [2p41].

This has led some scholars to think that Spinoza should have concluded that there is no relationship between reason and intuition with language; this statement excludes the scientific use of sensory experience.

From this, Spinoza says that:

“[...] it is clear that we perceive many things and form universal notions: [...] from signs, for example, from the fact that, having heard or read certain words, we recollect things, and form certain ideas of them, like those through which we imagine the things (P18S); [...]” [2p40s2]

5. Error in Language

Spinoza says that words,

“[...] are established according to the pleasure and power of understanding of ordinary people, so that they are only signs of things as they are in the imagination, but not as they are in the intellect. This is clear from the fact that names given to things that are only in the intellect, and not in the imagination, are often negative (for example, infinite, incorporeal, etc.), and also from the fact that they express negatively many things that are really affirmative, and conversely (for example, uncreated, independent, infinite, immortal). Because the contraries of these are much more easily imagined, they occurred first to the earliest men, and they used positive names. We affirm and deny many things because the nature of words—not the nature of things—allows us to affirm them. And in our ignorance of this, we easily take something false to be true.” [TdIE 89]

sense perception. Furthermore, Spinoza calls opinion or imagination the random experience along with the knowledge by signs (2p40s2).

Spinoza makes a genealogy of words: because we are born ignorant of the causes and nature of things (order and connection of the intellect), the earliest men only used their imagination to think themselves and the world—and thought only through images and inadequate ideas—and associated their spontaneous and inadequate thoughts with positive terms. As men developed reason and were capable of considering the internal order and connection of things, they realize positive ideas that rejected the inadequate ideas signified by words already forged; thus they used negative terms to refer to positive and adequate ideas. For instance, negative terms such as “infinite” is in reality a positive idea; meanwhile “finitude” is a positive term that refers to a negative idea; i.e., the negation of the infinite. If we give more importance to the word “infinite” than to the adequate conception that it expresses (insofar as the condition of the finite), we will think that is impossible for an infinite thing to exist.

The main problem from this different construction of denotation of general and universal terms is the following:

“[I]t is not surprising that so many controversies have arisen among the philosophers, who have wished to explain natural things by mere images of things.” [2p40s1]

Innumerable controversies and conflicts follow from philosophers using general and universal terms to try to explain the nature of things. As we have said, these terms do not express the nature of things, but the particular biography of each person as they are affected by their particular imaginations.

In this sense, Spinoza says at the end of the second book of the *Ethics*:

“I begin, therefore, by warning my readers, first, to distinguish accurately between an idea, or concept, of the mind, and the images of things which we imagine. And then it is necessary to distinguish between ideas and the words by which we signify things.” [2p49s9]

For the Dutch philosopher, if we do not distinguish accurately ideas, images, and words (*verba*), we will confound illusory things with real ones. In this passage we must read “idea” as “adequate idea”; “image” as “inadequate idea”.

This passage shows Spinoza’s rejection of a semantic conception of truth; i.e., truth is not a property of words or sentences, thus we must distinguish common meaning of words and nature of things. Some scholars have seen this distinction as the origin of contradiction in Spinoza’s usage of language: v. g. according to Savan, this passage seems to understand language not as a medium, but as an obstacle for adequate knowledge. How can Spinoza make any philosophical use of words such as “being”, “order”, “man”, “good”, insofar as he accepts that they are the result of the abstraction of particulars, and they are not naturally related? Spinoza says:

“[T]hose who confuse words with the idea, or with the very affirmation which the idea involves, think that they can will something contrary to what they are aware of, when they only affirm

⁹ The latin text says: “[...] distinguant inter ideas et verba, quibus res significamus.”

or deny with words something contrary to what they are aware of. But these prejudices can easily be put aside by anyone who attends to the nature of thought, which does not at all involve the concept of extension. He will then understand clearly that an idea (since it is a mode of thinking) consists neither in the image of anything, nor in words. For the essence of words and of images is constituted only by corporeal motions, which do not at all involve the concept of thought”. [2p49s]

Spinoza distinguishes a word and an idea, insofar the former is a mode of the attribute of Extension and the latter is a mode of the attribute of thought. But there is no direct parallelism between them, but the latter is certain inadequate idea that a human mind has from thinking the former. An example of the kind of illusions that language can generate, is the conception of the human will free from causes; i.e., the idea of the will capable of affirming or negating any idea without causal determination. For Spinoza’s philosophy, “free will” is an image that we can be picture through the association of the idea of the human will and the idea of the absence of causes; but that we can picture it does not mean that it is an adequate idea, because it is not.

When we only regard to the different associations that people make to a word, we may conclude that: “[...] there are as many differences of brains as palates” (E1A, p. 82).

As a matter of fact, imagination took advantage over intellect in order of constructing words.

“[S]ince words are part of imagination, i.e., since we feign many concepts, in accordance with the random composition of words in the memory from some disposition in the body, it is not to be doubted that words, as much as the imagination, can be the cause of many and great errors, unless we are very wary of them.” [TdIE 88]

Spinoza explains that:

“[T]he imaginations of the mind, considered in themselves contain no error, *or* [...] the mind does not err from the fact that it imagines, but only insofar as it is considered to lack an idea that excludes the existence of those things which it imagines to be present to it” [2p17s].

Imagination is a natural process, which expresses the positivity of its cause. The mind does not doubt of the actual existence (presence) of the external object represented by its image, insofar as it is not affected by another idea that excludes the actual existence (presence) of that body. This happens when the human body (and the human mind by parallelism) has an affect that diminishes or restrains the power or vigor (*vigeo*)¹⁰ of the idea that affirms the

¹⁰ Each image has a vigor (*vigeant*) that increases or decreases, because, “[...] images are not always equally vigorous” (Latin: “imagines non semper æquè vigeant”, 2p40s1, Gebhart II/121, l. 8). Albeit, Spinoza doesn’t say much about an image’s power or vigor, we can explain the increase of power by the frequency of similar affections, and the decrease of power by the absence of similar affections. But here arises two problems, if

actual existence or presence of the external body.¹¹ Thus, the human mind does not err because it imagines. Error is a consequence of ignorance. Namely, when the mind has a private or isolated idea that excludes the actual existence (presence) of the external body (the thing represented by the image). In other words, the human mind does not have reason (2p49s: *ratio*) to exclude the existence of the external object. Through images, the human mind contemplates external bodies as actually existing as long as there is no idea that contradicts the existence of the external body (2p17; cf. *supra*);¹² even though that external body is not present or it does not exist anymore (2p17c). In the human mind there is no affirmation or negation different from what the idea involves (2p49). The TdIE affirms that the human mind is an intellectual automaton (TdIE §85; cf. Ep 58, pp. 265- 266).

This absence of doubt is not a mathematical certainty, because it is not the product of an intellectual deduction. Following Descartes,¹³ in TTP, Spinoza calls this a “moral certainty,” a kind exclusive of the imagination.¹⁴ An image is a negative idea, insofar as it presents an object or set of objects but not as they are in themselves, but conditioned or determined from a certain point of view, i.e., from the particular affection received through its senses.

Error is the mental operation where a human mind affirms a false idea; which in case of language means that the body represented by a word actually exists as it has been accustomed to represent it.

6. Connotation and action

Memory does not stop with only one reference for each sign, but will associate many images to each sign, as many experiences as the person had with that sign. This association goes with a train of thoughts grounded in the particular habit of the person.

this were the case: first, shouldn't we have, right now, all the images that we have had since our childhood together with the ones we have now? Second, how do we explain age-old memories that we remember at present? I believe that Spinoza can respond by referring to the frequency of similar affections: we remember what is similar to what we are thinking, because the softness of the brain will not keep all of the traces it receives, but only the more frequent and similar affections.

¹¹ Moreover, even though each image is an idea that affirms the existence and the actual presence of an external body, it is given in a certain mind, and it is an idea that increases or diminishes, aids or restrains the power of that mind.

¹² It is important to consider that this proposition states that what is needed to change our contemplation is an affect (*affectus*), and not an affection (*affectio*). With this, it seems that Spinoza is confounding two distinct disciplines: the contemplation in epistemology (*affectio*), and the affects and feelings in psychology (*affectus*). Curley (Spinoza Collected Works: 464, n. 43) suggests that we should read “affection” instead of “affect.” He refers to the NS translation as “mode.” But the OP and the Vatican Manuscript (Spruit and Totaro, 2011: 138, l. 24) read the same word: “*affectus*.” Before 2p17, the word “*affectus*” only appears twice in the *Ethics*: in 1p8s2 (II/49) when he considers the imagination of ascribing human affects to God, and in 2a3 where he considers an axiom that love, desire, and the like are affects of the mind that cannot be given without the idea of the thing loved, desired, etc. But it will not be until 3d3 where he defines *affectus*; cf. previous note.

¹³ Cf. Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, Part IV, 205-206; AT VIIIA, 327-29. Descartes, 1985: 289-91.

¹⁴ TTP 15:185-186, where Spinoza considers the good life of the prophets as moral certainty for their teachings.

Through other ideas related to the word's reference, the human mind would continue another train of thoughts, which we can call the connotation of the word. Spinoza says that by the continuation of the process of memory,

“[...] each of us will pass from one thought to another, as each one's association has ordered the images of things in the body. For example; a soldier, having seen traces of a horse in the sand, will immediately pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a horseman, and from that to the thought of war, and so on. But a farmer will pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a plow, and then to that of a field, and so on. And so each one, according as he has been accustomed to join and connect the images of things in this or that way, will pass from one thought to another.” [2p18s]

The different experiences and habits of a soldier and a farmer constitute a different train of thoughts that correspond to the way by which their respective bodies have associated affections. Being the traces of a horse the sign, the denotation of that sign will be a horse for both a soldier and a farmer. But having they different experiences with a horse, the connotation that they give to that sign will be different: the soldier has a train of thoughts that goes to a horseman, then to the thought of war, and so on; the farmer goes to a plow, then to the thought of a field, and so on. Meanwhile the traces of a horse in the sand induce a train of thoughts related with war, in the farmer they activate a train of thoughts related with plow. The traces of the horse do not involve the nature of war neither of plow, but the soldier and the farmer respective experiences make that relation. Thus the connotation of a word will depend on the particular experiences of each one.

The different connotations of a same sign show the inadequacy of language, insofar there is no univocity in language, but each one will have in mind a connotation in order on his particular experiences. Scholars have been largely considered this, but they also have not considered another important issue for Spinoza's philosophy: the terms “soldier” and “farmer” refer to specific occupations to which are related the experiences described by the train of thoughts of people who dedicate themselves to those activities. Even though the soldier and the farmer would discuss between them on the sense or connotation of the horse prints, a soldier will have the same train of thoughts of other soldiers, an will happen the same among farmers. Thus Spinoza is capable of explaining intersubjective knowledge in a certain community, as soldiers or farmers.

Each context of denotation and connotation will impel their members to make the same mental associations with words. Thus,

“Anyone who attempts to change the meaning of a word to which he is accustomed will have great difficulty in afterwards sticking consistently to the change in his speech and writing. We are thus wholly convinced, for these and other reasons, that it could never have entered into anyone's head to corrupt a language but might certainly occur to someone to misrepresent the meaning of a writer by doctoring his texts or interpreting them wrongly.” [TTP 7, §9, p. 106]

This is extremely important for Spinoza's lecture on the Holy Scripture. Spinoza proposes that a method for an adequate interpretation of Scripture should fulfill the following condition:

“It is important to know of the life, character and concerns of each writer,^[17] so that we may know which statements are meant as laws and which as moral doctrine; we are more readily able to explain someone's words, the better we know his mind and personality [*genium et ingenium*]. It is also crucial to know on what occasion, at what time and for what people or age the various texts were written so that we may not confuse eternal doctrines with those that are merely temporary or useful only to a few people.” [TTP 7, §5, p. 102]

One of the keys of the interpretation of words and propositions expressed in the Scripture—as well as it will be for any language expression—is to know the mind and personality [*genium et ingenium*] of the writer; i.e., the train of thoughts that he is accustomed by experience to associate words with things; i.e., the biography of the writer, his experiences, occupations, happiness, worries, concerns, character, etc. Through this knowledge we can make an adequate interpretation of the ends that the writer thought for his words or, what is the same, the sense of his words. Here we are not going to consider the difficulty for us of having a complete and adequate knowledge of all the writers of the Scripture. For the aim of my paper I am only considering the condition of knowing the biography of the writer. That knowledge will be an adequate and complete idea of the process in which his words have the denotations and connotations that they have. Thus that knowledge will let us know if his words were meant to be laws, moral doctrine, metaphysical truths or fables (TTP 7, §15, p. 110).

Spinoza says:

“Something intended to promote the practice of piety and religion is called sacred and divine and is sacred only so long as people use it religiously. If they cease to be pious, the thing in question likewise, at the same time, ceases to be sacred. If they devote that thing to impious purposes, the very object that before was sacred will be rendered unclean and profane.” [TTP 12, §5, p. 160]

Spinoza uses the term “sacred” to refer to human actions accordant to moral precepts teach by the Scripture. As we have seen, language acquires denotation only in relation with certain images derived from experiences. It acquires connotation from other experiences and actions realized by the person using the language. Thus Spinoza continues,

“Words acquire a particular meaning simply from their usage. Words deployed in accordance with this usage in such a way that, on reading them, people are moved to devotion will be sacred words, and any book written with words so used will also be sacred. But if that usage later dies out so that the words lose their earlier meaning, or if the book becomes wholly neglected, whether from wickedness or because people no longer need it, then both words and book will then likewise

have neither use nor sanctity. Lastly, if the same words are differently deployed or it becomes accepted usage to construe the [same] words in the contrary sense, then both words and book which were formerly sacred will become profane and impure. From this it follows that nothing is sacred, profane, or impure, absolutely and independently of the mind but only in relation to the mind.” [TTP 12, §5, p. 160]

There is no sacred language or words by themselves, but only in relation with the actions that they induce. The usage of words is given by experience, and this is contained in the connotation of words for each person, society, activity, etc.

According to Spinoza, the main objective of Scripture is not the explanation of metaphysical truths, but the obedience of moral precepts. And those precepts are expressed through the connotation of the words and expressions used in the text. Therefore, the dutch philosopher says that:

“I assert only that the meaning, which alone entitles any text to be called divine, has come down to us uncorrupted, even though the words in which it was first expressed are deemed to have been frequently altered. As we said, this removes nothing from the dignity of Scripture; for Scripture would be no less divine even if written in other words or in a different language. Thus, no one can question that in this sense we have received the divine law, uncorrupted. For we see from Scripture itself, and without any difficulty or ambiguity, that the essence of the Law is to love God above all things and one’s neighbor as oneself. And this cannot be adulterated nor penned in a slap-dash, error-prone manner.” [TTP 10, §5, p. 165]

Spinoza says that we have lost many references of the Hebrew words used in the Scripture, and thus we cannot translate them to other languages. Even though he is convinced that the Scripture is a moral book wrote by people who faced the danger of loosing their state. Moral precepts expressed in the Scripture can be translated to any language, only under the condition that in this they induce piety in the readers. Thus for moral ends, it does not matter that we cannot translate nor understand denotation of many words in the Scripture, so long we can understand its moral denotation. But this seems contradictory; insofar we have shown that connotation depends on denotation. Nevertheless Spinoza will answer that suffices finding that connotation in the stories that express certain denotations that we can understand.

Thus Spinoza says:

“[...] Scripture does not offer definitions of the things which it speaks of, any more than does nature. Such definitions must be drawn from the various narratives about different things in Scripture just as definitions of natural things are deduced from the different actions of nature. The universal rule then for interpreting Scripture is to claim nothing as a biblical doctrine that we have not derived, by the closest possible scrutiny, from its own [i.e. the Bible’s] history.” [TTP 7, p. 99]

Even though we cannot have the denotation or definition of many words in the Bible, we can get close to them by applying the same method that we use to know natural laws; i.e. by induction from the actions expressed in the Scripture. And he makes his claim to interpret Scripture by itself and not through the truth or falsity of its references.

For the interpretation of Scripture the literal sense (signification or denotation) is the main sense. Spinoza says that:

“By obscure expressions [in the Scripture] I mean those whose sense is difficult to elicit from the context of a passage while those whose meaning is readily elicited I call clear. I am not now speaking of how easily or otherwise their truth is grasped by reason; for we are concerned here only with their meaning, not with their truth. [...] To make all this more clearly understood, I will give an example. Moses’ statements, ‘God is fire’ and ‘God is jealous’ are as plain as possible so long as we attend exclusively to the meaning of the words, and therefore I class them as clear expressions, even though, with respect to truth and reason, they are exceedingly obscure. Moreover even though their literal sense conflicts with the natural light of reason, unless it is also clearly in conflict with the principles and fundamentals derived from investigating the history of Scripture we must still stick to this, the literal sense.” [TTP 7, §§4-5, p. 100]

We must distinguish between the meaning of an expression and its truth: the former brings the relation between the expression and certain images; whilst the latter refers to the relation between the expression and a real thing outside the human mind that grasps such relation. The passage continues:

“In order to know whether or not Moses believed that God is fire, we certainly must not argue on the basis of whether this statement agrees or conflicts with reason but only from other statements made by Moses himself.” [TTP 7, §5, p. 100-1]

“Now the word ‘fire’ also stands for anger and jealousy (see Job 31.12), and therefore Moses’ statements are readily reconciled, and we are justified in concluding^[1] that they are one and the same. Again, Moses plainly teaches that God is jealous and nowhere teaches that God lacks emotions or mental passions. Hence^[2] we must evidently deduce that this is what Moses believed, or at least what he wanted to teach, however much we may think this statement conflicts with reason.” [TTP 7, §5, p. 101]

Spinoza appeals to other sacred books (in this case Job) to find the meaning of expressions such as “fire”.

7. Positivity in the image and its guidance under the intellect

Is there something we can do with language? Do we have to put it aside and search for truth only in a reason and intuition that never deals with language? Does this aim have any sense? By way of what we have already said, we can be aware that words can deceive us. But at the same time, we know that any word is the idea of a causal physical process that expresses the power of extension; i.e., association laws of habit.

After defining 20 affects—such as desire, joy, and sadness—at the end of book three of the *Ethics*, Spinoza says:

“I know that in their common usage these words mean something else. But my purpose is to explain the nature of things, not the meaning of words. I intend to indicate these things by words whose usual meaning is not entirely opposed to the meaning with which I wish to use them. One warning of this should suffice.” [3A20]¹⁵

This does not exclude the scientific or philosophical usage of language. It warns on the inadequacy (equivocity) of language. This passage shows: first, a straight relation between words and ideas, although in this case it is a relation between a word and an inadequate idea. Second, it shows a distinction between common usage of words and a philosophical usage, which interests more to Spinoza.

It is important to note that with the association process Spinoza between a word and a sensory perception Spinoza can explain truth in nouns and propositions that have a physical reference identified through sensory perception. In this case, a word or a proposition will express a true idea if it corresponds to a physical object, being sensory perception the medium of validation. Nonetheless the word or preposition is a sign that is not true in itself, only if it is related to a true idea.

Now is time to ask Spinoza about words and propositions that do not refer to physical things; mainly, what happens with metaphysical terms? Being Spinoza known as a metaphysical rationalist, he needs to have an explanation of the use of metaphysical terms. Spinoza says that,

“Euclid, who wrote nothing that was not eminently straightforward and highly intelligible, is easily explained by anyone in any language. In order to see his meaning and be certain of his sense there is no need to have a complete knowledge of the language in which he wrote, but only a very modest, even schoolboy, acquaintance with it, nor does one need to know the life, interest and character of the author, nor in what language he wrote, to whom and when, nor the subsequent fate of his book or its variant readings, nor how or by what Council it was authorized”. [TTP 7, §17, p. 111]

¹⁵ The following nomenclature is followed to reference the *Ethics*: first the number of the book; then “d” stands for Definition; “a” for Axiom; “p” for Proposition; “c” for Corollary; “post” of Postulate; “s” for Scholium; “d” for Demonstration; “A” for Appendix; “prae” for Preface; “lem” for Lemma. For other works: “TTP” for *Theological-Political Treatise*, followed by chapter and number of page in Gebhardt’s edition. “TdIE” for *Emendation of the Intellect*, followed by the number of the paragraph. “EP” for the *Correspondence*, followed by the number of the letter.

Language is part of nature,¹⁶ and there are no defects in nature, and its rules and laws (*naturae leges, et regulae*) are the same everywhere. Although language does not include its criterion of truth, we find that criterion outside it by using reason and common notions. Words and images can offer the material for the reason to obtain common notions, since “[w]hat is common to all things (on this see 2lem2 [of 2p13s], above) and is equally in the part and in the whole, does not constitute the essence of any singular thing” (2p37). 2lem2 says that “[a]ll bodies agree in certain things”. And its demonstration states that “[...] all bodies agree in that they involve the concept of one and the same attribute (by 1d1), and in that they can move more slowly, now more quickly, and absolutely, that now they move, now they are at rest.” This example applies to the simplest bodies (2a2” above; these simplest bodies are not atoms, see 1p15s).

But this statement is very important for Spinoza’s argument: “Nothing positive which a false idea has is removed by the presence of the true insofar as it is true” (4p1). In this case, the knowledge of the true nature of a thing does not stop a random association that we can have through language. But the positivity of the word rests in the positivity of its object, i.e., in the positivity of the effect of a natural cause. At the same time, there is no absolute falsity (2p35d), because any inadequate idea, no matter how inadequate it is, is a fragment of (as if it were mutilated from) an adequate idea that is given in God’s Infinite Intellect.

Spinoza says: “So imaginations do not disappear through the presence of the true insofar as it is true, but because there occurs others, **stronger** [*fortior*] than them, which exclude the present existence of the things we imagine, as we showed in 2p17.” (4p1s; bolds are ours).

Spinoza is also capable of explaining natural languages and temperament by language: each language reinforce both denotation and connotation of words, i.e. certain things with certain articulated sounds, images and train of thoughts of things not related essentially with them. Therefore Spinoza can explain that language is so important for the life of certain people.

Through the rational definition of terms, by which the human mind can recall previous deductions, the human mind can reuse language for philosophical and scientific purposes. In this case, words will be joined to a rational denotation by which the human mind will follow not the contextual connotation, but the rational deduction.

This is an advancement of knowledge. What the human intellect can do with images is to recognize it as part of an adequate idea, a true idea that explains the image as one of its effects. The process will be as follows: First, we have to consider many images of related phenomena. Second, we consider what is common to all these images (similarities), and distinguish what is distinct between them. As we imagine singular things, we can perceive their common properties.¹⁷ Moreover, “Those things which are common to all, and which

¹⁶ Images follow the Spinozian principle affirmed in 3Praef: “[...] nothing happens in Nature which can be attributed to any defect in it, for Nature is always the same, and its virtue and power of acting are everywhere one and the same, that is, the laws and rules of Nature, according to which all things happen, and change from one form to another, are always and everywhere the same. So the way of understanding the nature of anything, of whatever kind, must also be the same, namely, through the universal laws of nature.” Thus, any change in nature follows the same rules and laws. Because of the parallelism of the attributes, the same rules and laws are used to understand those changes, including images and inadequate ideas.

¹⁷ Gueroult, *Spinoza. L’Âme*, p. 334.

are equally in the part and in the whole, can only be conceived adequately” (2p38). Thus, any idea we deduce from this adequate idea will also be adequate (2p40), true (2p42 & 2p43), necessary (2p44) and eternal by its cause (*sub specie aeternitatis*, 2p44c2).¹⁸

For instance, the mind will reject the contextual connotation of a word, but be able of understand it as part of a whole natural process. In other terms, the mind will be the adequate cause of some of its images.

An image is an inadequate idea. Spinoza considers that a word is a synthesis (or association) between certain sounds and certain images of things. These images are also synthesis of other images. Thus a word is a sign that refers to certain images. Scholars have pass out an important implicit supposition in Spinoza’s thoughts on language; that is, that a word and a proposition (or synthesis of words) only differs in that the former does not make explicit the images that it associates, whilst the latter does. Nevertheless this does not mean that any proposition expresses an adequate idea; to do so is needed the participation of reason and intuition.

As a matter of fact, the main problem of language is when it does not make explicit the images that is associates, and leave to the listener the freedom to interpret the connotation and denotation of the words as he has been accustomed to do it. Spinoza uses geometrical order because this makes explicit the ideas that it associates with words through definitions, axioms, postulates, and, over all, demonstrations. For the Dutch philosopher, the geometrical order is a kind of mental map that point out metaphysical entities and distinguishes them from mental entities (both entities from imagination and entities from reason), and indicates certain results that we must expect so long as we are doing the correct inferences and mental associations with them. If my reading is correct, there are a number of dangers, among which: how can be sure that we are making true inferences or demonstrations, and not just associations imposed through an authority argument. Examples of the Spinozian use of the authority argument are the pretended analogies between geometry and metaphysics, where Spinoza says that in the same manner in which the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles (2p49s, 4p57s), the demonstration of a metaphysical entity X is also self-evident. What Spinoza must demonstrate is the reality and properties of that entity X through its constitutive elements, or something like that, but not through other things to which it is not metaphysically related, as happens with an analogy.

Conclusions

I have argued that language gives an inadequate knowledge of things insofar it is an idea of images and bodily motions associated arbitrarily; thus it represents fragments of a

¹⁸ Klever (“Axioms in Spinoza’s Science and Philosophy of Science,” p. 182) comments that for Spinoza, “[t]he objective of science is: the concatenation of our perceptions (or, if one prefers this language, the phenomena). We try to bring them together and to integrate them in one model of the universe (or a section of it). There is, of course, no one-way-traffic: cross-sectional relationships are unavoidable. The way in which we can reach this endpoint is, the deduction of our perceptions (=phenomena) from general, all-pervasive characteristics or properties; or, in other words, the understanding of the diverse phenomena as appearances from fundamental axioms or laws.” Klever supports his view with TTP 5,§37 and TTP 7, §§6-7 and §12.

complete causal process. I also have stated that language falsity consists in the absence of correspondence between the word and a real thing. Meanwhile error is the mental operation where a human mind affirms that the thing represented by a word actually exists. In order to do these I have studied four examples of language in the *Ethics*: 1) the word “*pomum*” and its denotation (reference, *significatio*) is the association of two bodily motions (2p18s); 2) the horse prints in the sand and its connotations (*sensus*) are the train of thoughts joined through habit (2p18s); 3) universal terms (“man”, “horse”, “good”) are certain degree of abstraction of particulars by habit (2p40s1); and 4) transcendental terms (“being”, “thing”) are a total abstraction of particulars (2p40s1). Lastly, I have proposed that—for Spinoza—language inadequacy can be overcome by a rational model that incorporates words redefined and related with common notions, intuitions, and the result of rational deduction; in which case language follows adequate ideas, and be signs of true knowledge. Geometrical method offers such rational model. But the application of this method to metaphysics is not straightforward, as Spinoza intended.

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